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"Peace Is At Hand" -- 1968-69

[What follows is a partial, abbreviated recounting of my own experience of the oddly optimistic, acquiescent--and misguided--political mood in the US in the 17-month period between early April 1968 (coinciding with the Princeton conference, subject of the previous "fragment") and late August of 1969 (the WRI conference at Haverford, focus of the next fragment). It is presented as a bridge for the reader between these two episodes, and to provide some background for the latter.]

For two years after Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run again for president--from his announcement on March 31, 1968 until Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, April 30, 1970--with the exception of a single month in the fall of '69¹, the Vietnam war virtually disappeared as a major issue from American political debate.

As Richard N. Goodwin has recently written², "Johnson's withdrawal had virtually eliminated the war as an issue."

Goodwin is referring to the Democratic primary campaign, but remarkably, the same observation held true for the election campaign in the fall, and indeed--with the exception of the month of protest in the fall of '69--throughout the first 16 months of Nixon's new Administration.

This reflected a tenacious belief underlying American political discussion--that Johnson's March 31 announcement, which included his decision to end bombing of the northern part of North Vietnam and to seek public negotiations with Hanoi, constituted a conscious and decisive turning-point toward the prompt ending of major American involvement in the war in Indochina.

This belief, based on a number of false assumptions, has strangely persisted over the last decade--as reflected in books still being published--despite the fact that the war did not, after all, end in 1968, or indeed for seven more years, and despite the fact that much new information on the real intentions

¹ From October 15, the first Moratorium day of protest, simultaneously in cities across the country, to November 15, the second Moratorium and the Mobilization's March in Washington.

² Remembering America, Boston 1988, p. 528.

of Johnson and Nixon has become available belying such an interpretation³.

Thus, Neil Sheehan's A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam (New York, 1988) says that, after the Tet Offensive of January 31, 1968, "What could not be saved was the war. Westmoreland had lost it." (p. 717)

A few pages later he recounts:

"Five days later, on March 31, 1968, Lyndon Johnson gave his televised speech to the nation restricting the bombing of North Vietnam and renouncing any possibility of another term as president in order to hold the country together in the time he had left. Three days later, on April 3, 1968, the Vietnamese surprised the president and his secretary of state again. Radio Hanoi announced that they would negotiate with the Americans."

Sheehan goes on in his next sentence to say of his protagonist, my close friend John Paul Vann:

"John Vann could not accept the death of the war. He could not admit that Tet had written a finis to it." (p. 722)

The issue was of more than academic interest in my life. If I had believed that the war was dead as of 1968, that Tet had written finis to it, I would never have given the Pentagon Papers to Senator Fulbright's Committee in November 1969 nor to Neil Sheehan of the New York Times in the spring of 1971.

The Pentagon Papers themselves--the 47-volume, 7000-page, Top Secret History of US Decision-Making in Vietnam, 1945-68--reflect in their closing pages and in their very title this same interpretation.

The study, when launched by McNamara in mid-1967, was formally open-ended in terms of content and time-period, and work on it continued into early 1969; but its authors and its supervisors decided to end it with Johnson's speech of March 31, 1968.

The choice of this cut-off date for the history of US decision-making in Vietnam clearly reflected the fact that those in charge of the study (Morton H. Halperin and Leslie Gelb, under Paul Warnke) shared the public's belief that the decisions

³ For another recent book that accepts this traditional misconception, see Larry Berman's forthcoming Johnson's War, New York, in press for 1989. For refutation, see Richard M. Nixon's Memoirs, New York 1978, and The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House by Seymour M. Hersh, New York, 1983.

announced on that date meant a decisive shift toward US disengagement.

A three-page "Epilogue" at the very end of the study begins with the April 3 announcement of Hanoi, mentioned by Sheehan above, and goes on:

"The first step on what would undoubtedly be a long and tortuous road to peace apparently had been taken. In one dramatic action, President Johnson had for a time removed the issue of Vietnam from domestic political contention." (Pentagon Papers, Beacon Press edition, p. 603)

"For a time" turned out to be for most of the next two years.

What was remarkable about this prolonged period of misguided public confidence that "peace was at hand" was that although some form of talks and eventually formal negotiations were proceeding throughout the interval, so was the war, and at much the same scale of violence as before, especially in the air.

After March '68, US planes were no longer bombing above the 20th parallel in North Vietnam. After November they were not bombing North Vietnam at all. They simply shifted their targets to South Vietnam and Laos (and secretly, in early 1969, to Cambodia as well), while dropping a higher total tonnage than before.

In the last 10 months of 1968, the Johnson Administration dropped more bombs on Indochina than in the previous four years together (1.7 million tons, compared to 1.5 million tons since 1964). Nixon continued at the rate of about 1 million tons--half the total bomb tonnage of World War II--each year: for four years.

Although at various points in this particular period I was as (mistakenly) hopeful as anyone else about the prospects for a negotiated settlement, I seemed to be among a very small minority that kept the reality of continued large-scale war in mind: along with the possibility that the war might actually go on for a very long time, and the recurrent possibility that it might escalate, by deliberate decision in Washington or Hanoi.

From the time I returned from Vietnam in mid-1967, I was committed to the priorities of, first, avoiding new escalation, and second, finding a way out.

I was anxious to share my perceptions and views with any political figure who wanted to hear them; and my reputation from Vietnam and the Pentagon was such that quite a few wanted to listen, in both parties.

Listening, in turn, to advisors or representatives of a field of Presidential candidates from Gavin, Romney and Rockefeller to Kennedy and Humphrey, I found that they seemed to share these priorities.

I would have liked to talk to representatives of all the potential candidates, but regrettably, I did not know anyone in line with Nixon. However, his purported "secret plan to end the war" sounded to most observers (wishfully, and mistakenly as it turned out) like some scheme for a disguised withdrawal.

In fact, both Walter Lippmann and Joseph Kraft, as I recall--my own hopes were influenced by them--guessed that the "new Nixon" was actually more likely to end the war expeditiously than was Humphrey, with his ties to the past.

In effect, the presumption was that Nixon's plan, if any, was compatible with what Henry Kissinger, who was working for Rockefeller until the convention, was now saying publicly and privately: that a new Administration, accepting the failure of previous aims and strategy, should settle for a negotiated solution that would provide no more than a "decent interval" before Vietnamese Communist leadership inherited predominant political power in South Vietnam.

[Nixon seemed to confirm this assumption after winning the election, when he chose Kissinger as his Assistant for National Security. That impression was fatally misleading. The secret reality--scarcely recognized to this day--was that Richard Nixon did not regard such an outcome, ever, as at all acceptable, and that he did have a secret plan to avert it indefinitely.

Whether or not Kissinger was ever sincere in proposing that the U.S. limit its objectives to procuring a "decent interval" before a Communist flag flew over Saigon, he secretly jettisoned any such notion when he went to work for Nixon, to whom it was anathema. Kissinger became the enthusiastic manager of Nixon's secret plan to preclude indefinitely--in part by secret threats and demonstrations of Nixon's willingness to escalate--any such Communist takeover.

Kissinger did not, however, inform his liberal friends in universities and the media, with whom he remained in private contact, that he had shifted gears. So until the invasion of Cambodia, Nixon got the benefit of the mistaken belief that he had accepted Kissinger's previous plan for a disguised withdrawal. (Kissinger's earlier proposal was published in Foreign Affairs at the end of '69, after Kissinger's appointment by Nixon was announced, though it had been written before that appointment).]

Early in his campaign, Robert Kennedy had asked me to leave Rand and work for him full-time in charge of Vietnam issues, but I declined at that point. I wanted to stay free till the conventions so that I could continue to consult with the advisors to other candidates across the board on this one issue. But my hopes were with him, and I worked closely with his speechwriters, Adam Walinsky and Jeff Greenfield, on his Vietnam speeches, including the last public speech he gave.

Like a number of other people, I had come to feel more attached to Robert Kennedy than to any other person in public life I have ever met: starting with the fact that, since my return from Vietnam, no other American had so impressed me with the depth and urgency of his concern about the war.

(I should say that until the WRI conference in August 1969, I had actually met no one in the active antiwar movement, where this degree of concern and commitment was almost commonplace, in sad contrast to official circles and the Establishment.)

From talks with him starting in September 1967, I had concluded that Robert Kennedy was the single major candidate (McCarthy being highly unlikely to win the nomination) who could be counted on to bring about early and decisive US extrication from Vietnam. (In retrospect, I think this was a sound judgment. Which is to say that Kennedy's death--not dealt with here--removed the single such candidate from the political race.)

For this reason I had no conflict about turning down Hubert Humphrey when he, too, offered me a full-time job on his campaign. (Nor did I have reason to reconsider after Kennedy's death). I knew he had been an early skeptic about our involvement, but it was hard to respect the degree to which he had knuckled under to Johnson's policy, and was still doing so.

Almost to the end of the campaign, Humphrey was unable to bring himself to buck Johnson by calling for an end to the bombing, which in turn kept me from paying any attention to the campaign: till the last week when the bombing of North Vietnam did stop. (From Robert Kennedy's death till this point, I had pretty much dropped out: from politics, from work, from Vietnam. Another story.)

Humphrey's offer came at the end of a luncheon at the Waldorf on the day he announced his candidacy in New York. A number of guests had been invited there to "advise" him, though really, it turned out, to be looked at as prospective staffers.

At the luncheon Humphrey made the disturbing remark at one point: "I'm really very worried about this simplistic slogan, 'No More Vietnams.' [associated, of course, with both McCarthy and Kennedy supporters] That's very dangerous."

Sitting almost directly across from him, I felt some comment was called for. After a slight silence, with no one else volunteering, I said, "Well, it's better than a slogan, 'More Vietnams.'" Another short silence ensued.

As we were leaving, I pressed the point again (hoping to discourage him from staking out his "worry" on this point as a campaign position): "If 'No More Vietnams' means no more unilateral U.S. military interventions, that's really a pretty good policy."

(My job offer, and later talks with Humphrey on Vietnam policy, came after and despite this exchange, whatever that indicates).

[In the twenty years since, it has become clear that "No More Vietnams" means very different things to different people. It still has a good ring to me, but it is undeniably ambiguous. A New York Times story of June 30, 1988, quotes President Reagan, on a campaign visit to Miami on behalf of Representative Connie Mack, as saying:

"Let me offer here a simple, straightforward message: No more Vietnams; no more Nicaraguas; no more Bay of Pigs. Never again."

The quotation continues, I am sorry to say:

"Connie Mack and I stand with the Nicaraguan resistance. We will not rest until we have won for them the full support they need--and until they have won for themselves the genuine democracy and freedom for which they have so bravely struggled."]

Another problem with the proposition "No More Vietnams" as a focus of political discussion in the period when it arose, twenty years ago, was that it suggested that the Vietnam War itself was over; or on the way to ending; and with no further need for attention or pressure from the electorate to end it.

Each of these suppositions should have been seen as problematic, at least. In actual fact, each one of them was false in 1968 and '69, and for each of the next five years. Yet one or all of these beliefs, especially the last, was held by a large fraction of the electorate--the media and Establishment in particular--for most of the whole seven-year period in question.

One of the earliest demonstrations of this came in a symposium at the University of Chicago, involving an unusual and impressive range of scholars and former officials, addressed to

the questions: "What are the lessons of Vietnam? How should these lessons shape our foreign policy?"

Of course, one was entitled to draw lessons from Vietnam in any year of that conflict, or after it, but the search for "the" lessons clearly suggested that the war was thought to be completed, the case closed, and the time had come for a final balancing of the books. That was indeed the premise of most of the participants, as I remember.

This discussion took place during the first week in June, 1968. The war had seven years to go.

Those remaining years of war confirmed a number of old lessons, but they provided rich materials for some new ones, though these have tended to remain unlearned to this day.

For example, the potential lesson--both from experience under Johnson in the remainder of 1968 and under Nixon until 1972-- that an Administration's willingness to "talk" and even "negotiate" with an adversary could be very different from a willingness to compromise in order to arrive at a negotiated deal. (That lesson could have been very helpful to the public and Congress in interpreting arms control "negotiations" as well.)

Or another: that an administration that destroys itself by lying about its aims and strategy may be replaced by another that lies about such matters just as much; and even proceeds to follow in much the same path, covertly, in the belief that it will be more successful because it is meaner and cleverer.

Early lessons might well have been aimed at shortening this very conflict, rather than saved for elsewhere. As it was, the edited transcript of the Chicago symposium was planned for release under the name, No More Vietnams. But the sharp controversies among the participants about the nature of the lessons extended to the title.

The major disagreement here was not over whether the classic, traditional, original Vietnam War was finished yet or not, but whether or not one wanted "More Vietnams," i.e. other, new ones: however one took the meaning of that. So the final, compromise title was No More Vietnams?

The subsequent election campaign took place amid the general belief that either candidate would proceed to negotiate a withdrawal of American troops and an end to American involvement in Vietnam, so the war was not a major issue.

In the few days remaining after the bombing of North Vietnam was halted on November 1, I took an interest in the candidates,

and ended up voting for Humphrey--on grounds of personality and domestic politics--despite my suspicion that he might well take longer to trim US aims and get out of Vietnam than the new Nixon would.

(I was wrong. Among other things, as I suppose I should have known, there was no new Nixon. Just this month, in a December 12, 1988 column in the New York Times, his "volunteer flack" William Safire explains how he got Nixon to go along with that hoax, even though the notion that there was a deficient "old Nixon" irritated the former Vice President. Safire says, in effect, that he pointed out to Nixon that it was a clever lie that would be readily believed and would prove useful. He knew how to appeal to Nixon.)

Shortly after the election, as the incoming Assistant for National Security Affairs, Kissinger passed a request to the Rand Corporation through his friend (and mine, then) Fred Ikle, head of the Social Sciences Division, to prepare a study of Alternative Options for Vietnam that he could present to the NSC in the new Administration. Rand President Harry Rowen named me in charge of the study and Kissinger approved this.

On Christmas Day, 1968, I flew to New York to present Kissinger with the completed drafts of several studies, the result of several weeks of intensive work in Washington and Santa Monica, on which a number of teams of analysts had collaborated under my supervision. Harry Rowen and Fred Ikle accompanied me for discussions with Kissinger at the Hotel Pierre, which was the transition location for the incoming White House staff.

After going over the seven alternative options that I had defined--each analyzed and roughly costed in the study--with Kissinger and his consultant Thomas C. Schelling, I wrote a revised draft of the study on December 27 at the Pierre.

Next Kissinger asked me to expand another paper I had drafted, a set of questions on controversial aspects of the war. At my suggestion, he subsequently sent these out to be answered in parallel by each of the national security agencies. This latter study, known as National Security Study Memorandum No. 1 (NSSM-1) led to 500 pages of replies from the various agencies. At Kissinger's request, I spent the month of February in the NSC offices helping to summarize these for the President.

While I worked on NSSM-1, Fred Ikle edited the Options Paper stylistically. The study was then circulated to the members of the National Security Council. Kissinger's briefing of this Options Study to the President and the NSC was the subject of the first NSC meeting of the Nixon Administration in January, 1969.

This final draft of the study was identical to mine in substance with one exception that looms large in retrospect: the omission, at Kissinger's request, of my Option VII, Unilateral US Withdrawal. That was the single option of the seven alternatives that guaranteed US extrication from the war by American decision, subject to no practical "veto" by Vietnamese, North or South.

In contrast to the omitted Option VII, all of the other options--all six of those that the NSC actually considered formally--had the potential of keeping the US involved militarily in Vietnam indefinitely, unless either the Saigon regime and armed forces improved radically to the point of being self-sufficient, or the Hanoi government offered compromises acceptable to the Administration or refrained from launching offensives.

At first glance, that potential for endlessly continued war might have seemed, to an experienced observer, certain to be fulfilled. Past history gave little grounds for hope that either of the above conditions would be met, permitting the US to leave, as Nixon demanded, "with honour."

But there remained, in the spring of 1969, two seemingly reasonable grounds for hope that the US would nevertheless manage to end its involvement. One was that Nixon, at the first NSC meeting, defined the mutual withdrawal of US and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam as an acceptable compromise, and decided to offer this in the Paris negotiations just beginning.

I myself, along with Morton Halperin--who had become one of Kissinger's deputies--regarded this as a very hopeful beginning, indeed, our own preferred first move. It seemed really possible that the Hanoi regime would accept it, as their only way to get the fast and total withdrawal of US forces, with their accompanying close air support and artillery. At any rate, they had never been tested on this approach, and nothing could be lost in proposing it.

But what if Hanoi rejected this? (Which is what they proceeded to do. In retrospect, the National Liberation Front or "VC" guerrilla forces in the South had been so depleted in the Tet Offensive of 1968 that Hanoi no longer felt it could withdraw the Northern troops without unacceptable risk to their cause).

Then one could still hope that Nixon and Kissinger, despite having chosen not to present the Extrication or Unilateral Withdrawal course to the NSC for formal consideration, would tacitly adopt this course.

[No President ever did accept this course of Unilateral Withdrawal, but Congress eventually did, in the form of the McGovern-Hatfield Bill, which cut off funding for US operations

in Vietnam. In other words, it was via this "Option VII," unprecedentedly imposed by Congress using its constitutional power over the budget, that the US war in Indochina was finally ended.

However, as of the spring of 1969, the notion that--as a third way out--Congress could or might force this course on a reluctant Executive had not yet been born in anyone's imagination. It was invented in September of 1969 by Republican Senator Charles Goodell: he could not get a single co-sponsor for the idea that fall.

Indeed, Goodell was virtually expelled from his party for this heretical transgression--Vice President Agnew described him as "the Christine Jorgenson of the Republican Party"--and he lost his seat in a three-way race in 1970 in which most Republican funding went to his successful rival James Buckley running on the Conservative ticket.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, this was the approach that eventually prevailed by mid-1973 under the sponsorship of McGovern and Hatfield.]

Just as it seems reasonable to have hoped that Hanoi authorities might opt for mutual withdrawal--until they proved adamant--so it seems reasonable, for at least a while in 1969, even for an insider to have hoped that Nixon would espouse unilateral withdrawal, in some guise, if mutual withdrawal was unattainable through negotiations. Reasonable, in the sense that it seemed clear to some relatively experienced and well-informed analysts-- including me, for one--that that was what the President ought to do.

That hope, at any rate, was the basis of Morton Halperin's unwontedly cheerful state of mind in April and May of 1969. Having been known to me as a consistent skeptic and pessimist about US prospects and strategy at every stage of our involvement--i.e., having always been right so far--he had to be taken seriously by me now that he was saying in early May: "For the first time I can remember, I am not in disagreement with an administration policy on Vietnam."

That pronouncement was based on his approval of the US negotiating proposal for Mutual Withdrawal, which had not yet been definitively rejected by Hanoi, and his belief, partly based on confidence in his own influence, that if Mutual Withdrawal were ruled out, the Administration would adopt some form of Unilateral Withdrawal that would result in effective disengagement.

Roughly this same expectation ruled the minds of most commentators, Congress and the public. It was the general

supposition that this was the nature of Nixon's "secret plan," whether or not that existed in explicit detail. Most of them had taken it for granted ever since March 31, 1968, that this was the only reasonable course any President could adopt.

About that they were not wrong, in retrospect. But Presidents do not always choose reasonable courses. Unwary of this possibility, despite the recent example of Johnson--or perhaps because of the recent fates of Johnson's policy, his deceit, and his Administration, all of which most people regarded as sufficiently exemplary warnings to his successor--no part of the electorate brought pressure to bear on the Administration to shape its Vietnam policy in the first half of 1969.

The antiwar movement was quiescent. Despite the heavy bombing described earlier, draft calls and ground actions involving significant casualties, no one was on the streets that spring protesting the war. There was an occupation of campus buildings that spring at Cornell--reminiscent of actions around the world the previous year--but it had to do with racial relations on the campus, not the war.

The student at Berkeley, James Rector, who was killed by police gunfire at the end of the spring term was not demonstrating against the war. In fact, he had not been demonstrating at all, he was watching events from a rooftop. He was a spectator-victim of efforts by the University of California and Berkeley police to close down a "People's Park" so the University could go ahead with its plans to make it a parking lot.

Toward the end of August, visiting Washington on my way to a conference at Haverford College near Philadelphia, I learned from Morton Halperin that his hopes about Nixon's course of action in Vietnam had been highly over-optimistic. That was also true, it followed, about the national mood that I have been describing. He was back, unhappily, in his familiar posture of sharp dissatisfaction with administration policy on Vietnam; and he was about to leave the government. What he told me was very much on my mind as I went to Pennsylvania.